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World Chronicle

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GUEST: **James GRANT**
Executive Director
UNICEF

JOURNALISTS: Afsane Bassir Pour, *Le Monde*
Tuyet Nguyen, United Press International

MODERATOR: Michael Littlejohns

UNICEF: "PROGRESS OF NATIONS"

James Grant, Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), discusses UNICEF's new report which ranks countries according to their achievement for their children. Surprisingly, during the last two decades some industrialized countries, particularly English-speaking countries, have drastically reduced the funds available for children's needs, while many developing nations have progressed to the point at which they have met many of the basic needs for their children. Today, there are more immunized children under the age of five in Mexico City and Calcutta than in New York City. Mr. Grant calls on all countries to renew their commitment to children all over the world.

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Executive Producer:	Kamil Taha
Director:	Livingston Hinckley
Production Assistant:	Ellen McGuffie

ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Often the progress of a nation is judged by its military or economic strength. But a new report published by the United Nations Children's Fund, or UNICEF, ranks countries of the world according to their achievements for their children in all aspects of life. With us today to discuss this new report, "The Progress of Nations", is James Grant, Executive Director of UNICEF. Joining me today to talk with Mr. Grant are Afsane Bassir Pour of *Le Monde* and Tuyet Nguyen of United Press International. Mr. Grant, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

Mr. Grant, one of the astonishing features of this report, "The Progress of Nations", is that the United States seems to be rather low in the tables. What's going on there?

GRANT: Well, the United States, among the industrial countries, has had less progress for children in the last 20-25 years than any of the others. In fact, the condition of children in many respects as shown by this report deteriorated over the last 20 years.

LITTLEJOHNS: And why is that?

GRANT: And today we have twice as many children living below the poverty line as any other major industrial country and four times the average of the industrial world. Well, the reasons are several. Most fundamental is an attitude of government, which has tended to privatize in the last 20 years the care of children at the same time that we have -- shall I call it socialized ? -- the care of elders. So today, 25 per cent of the federal budget is spent on care for people over 65 and less than 5 per cent is spent on families with children. So you see the contrast. And this gap has increased very greatly in the last 20 years. It's a phenomenon we also see to a lesser extent in all the English-speaking countries. In the last 10 years the conditions for children in English-speaking industrial countries has deteriorated in many respects, whereas in the continental countries, in Japan, the continued progress for children has moved right along.

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Now, in the US, [there are] several other reasons. One is a question of attitude and policy. But a second one is that the average worker in the United States today works 163 more hours per year than he or she did 25 years ago. This is one whole extra month. It means there's 10 to 12 hours less time spent by a worker with his family. And third, we've seen the percentage of women in the work force go up from 30 per cent to 66 per cent in the United States.

LITTLEJOHNS: So they're not at home to look after the kids.

BASSIR POUR: But they earn more money, on the other hand, don't they? By working more?

GRANT: Well, but that comes to the next point, which is that for the bottom half of the population they actually earn, per worker, significantly less today than they did 20 years ago in real terms. So that with the addition of the spouse to the work force, they make only about 8 per cent more per family than they did 20 years ago. So there's a major deprivation of time attention to children. And this shift of time from children is accompanied by a weakening of the social safety net, the special aid given -- this safety net for children in the United States in 1990 was significantly less than it was in 1980.

LITTLEJOHNS: I don't quite understand this point you make about the English-speaking countries. What has it got to do with language?

GRANT: I don't know, completely, other than the fact that the shift to market economy, to privatization, has been under the Margaret Thatcher, the Reagan-Bush period. That pendulum, while it's been a world-wide pendulum, has gone further. And so there was a distinct walking away of government support programs for children. And I think the lesson that we're all learning is that, yes, the market economy approach is basically the most efficient economically, but there are certain things in society that only can be provided by society, not just by the family, and you ignore this at the peril.

In the United States today, for example, as you look at the consequences of all this, it shows up not only in the proportion of children below the poverty line, it shows up in the fact that over 90 per cent of the children that were killed by guns in the industrial world were killed in the United States. Now, we have less than a third of the population of the industrial west, but we have well over 90 per cent of those killed. And what commands the attention, let's say when eight children, street children, are killed in

Brazil by paramilitary police forces -- and it properly is the subject of condemnation -- that same day, the number of children killed by guns in the United States vastly exceeded those in Brazil. And it happens every day. It's not just an episodic thing, but it's going on the day before what happened in Brazil and the day after.

And this is all a subject that needs much more attention. And the US society is shifting, I mean, very clearly. If you look at the health bill, 37 million people are not covered by health insurance. Well, the great majority of those people, or a sizeable number, are children. Poor children. So they will be the single biggest beneficiary of any group in society when the health bill goes through.

BASSIR POUR: I was just going to say that President Clinton, when he was here, spoke a lot about children. And he even mentioned UNICEF and you. Did that take a lot of lobbying? And is he going to follow through on the promises he made, do you think?

GRANT: Well, to follow through on the promises is up to him, but it's also up to Congress and the American public. I would say that when he said we need to do better by the world's children, including American children, and we need a new commitment to children, I think he personally genuinely meant it. If you look back over his lifestyle, his lifetime actions, if you look at Mrs. Clinton, Hillary Rodham Clinton, her principal preoccupation really for decades was the condition of children. She was chairman of the Children's Defense Fund, the biggest non-governmental organization concerned with the well being of children, in the United States.

So I think it's a genuine one on their part. It suffers, obviously, from the fact that what captures attention -- and time, management time, and money -- are the loud emergencies. And if you look at the US foreign aid programme, it is increasingly preoccupied with resources for Russia, for backing up political settlements; it's in the Egyptian-Israeli arrangement following Camp David -- $5 billion is still devoted to undergirding that; the recent Gaza -- the recent PLO-Israeli agreement, very welcome, but more money will go into that --

LITTLEJOHNS: So less money for children is what you're saying.

GRANT: And there's less money for, shall we call it, development oriented to children, so that what is in jeopardy today in the US foreign aid programme is money for Africa, money for population, money for children, money for UNDP, money for UNICEF -- these discretionary accounts tend to get eroded away as these other

emergencies -- peacekeeping, an extra billion dollars from the United States will need to go for peacekeeping -- so the international affairs budget gets pushed towards these things; at the same time there's a reduction in the overall international affairs budget for deficit reduction. Then what's left to be squeezed? And this is why the President's comment to the General Assembly on September 27th, when he helped open on the opening morning, was so important. Because it was the first time this president had spoken out on what you might call the development-environment-sustained development-children set of issues -- population.

NGUYEN: Mr. Grant, your report really praised some developing countries, especially former socialist countries like Vietnam and Cuba. Now, talking about the shift toward the free market and away from the care of children, is this a good shift for socialist countries and poor countries, towards a free market?

GRANT: Well, what had happened in socialist countries was that in their earlier periods the social progress for children was very spectacular. Child death rates came down, education rates went up. What we found in, let's say the Soviet Union, as they got a hardening of the arteries, was that this progress began to falter. But relatively speaking, the condition -- in terms of child death rates, child education rates -- remained high. And a major challenge is -- as there is this adjustment with a human face -- how to make it with a human face as they adjust to the market economy, and how do you build, maintain the safety net? Now, China provided the first big test of this when they made the shift away from communes 10 years ago.

NGUYEN: Yes, but the report, you know, probably could be misleading, because it seems to praise achievement in child care and developing the welfare of people. But the rich countries also give a lot of money to those programmes. They have -- they may fail. But what can put a poor country ahead of a rich country in terms of child care?

GRANT: Oh. Well, let me make it clear that -- two points. One is that in the last 40 years we've seen more progress for children than in the preceding 2,000 years. And so that we've seen life expectancy increase more since 1950 than since the beginning of recorded history -- just to give you one very concrete illustration. And the average income in real terms in the developing world has more than doubled since 1960. Life expectancy's gone up by more than a third since 1960. So that there's been much more progress in the developing world. And even in the last 10 years, this progress continued. So we saw, for example, immunization rates in the developing world go up from 20 per cent ten years ago to over 80 per cent today. And in the process, the developing

countries are learning new techniques that are even more efficient than those we use in the industrial countries. For example, at age one, the children in Calcutta, in Lagos, in Mexico City, are more highly immunized than the children in the United States at age five. At age one, compared to age five. In Calcutta, it's over 80 per cent at age one; New York City and Washington, D.C. it's 45 per cent at age two.

LITTLEJOHNS: But their risk of disease is higher there probably; too.

GRANT: Yes, but still, it is important in this society, the United States, to catch the kids, too. Now, what they have learned in this period is they use the new capacity to communicate, to use radio, television, religious priests, imams, school teachers, to use these people to communicate, to mobilize. And this has been a very efficient way to get this new knowledge out to people and to motivate them to come in. We have not used this to the same extent in industrial societies, and now, in the fall of 1993, we do see Washington, D.C. and New York City picking up these techniques that have been developed in Calcutta and Mexico City and applying them in the United States.

NGUYEN: But I think there is more of a concentration of NGOs, of UN specialized agencies into those poor countries than there has been in rich countries. Maybe you can turn around and bring the NGOs into specialized countries and rich countries.

LITTLEJOHNS: Before Mr. Grant answers that question, I want to do the mid-show identification. This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is James Grant, the Executive Director of UNICEF. Now, Mr. Grant.

GRANT: Well, the answer on that, of course, is that there are more NGOs in New York City than there are in Calcutta, even though there are many -- or Mexico City -- in Calcutta and Mexico City today. It is a question of capturing the attention of the non-governmental organizations, and then the mayors of New York City and Washington, D.C. have to turn to and ask these groups to participate and give them places to participate. So we are seeing --

LITTLEJOHNS: But those African-American mayors, by the way, is that a factor at all?

GRANT: Not necessarily, but in some ways it makes it easier for these programmes, because what you are looking for is to involve the economic bottom half of

society more, and they tend to be in the racial minority groups. So that to have a black mayor improves the communication capacity --

LITTLEJOHNS: Actually racial majorities in their respective cities.

GRANT: Racial majorities in some cities, yes. Washington, D.C., for example.

BASSIR POUR: I was thinking -- another subject in your report, that you link the rate of infant mortality to reduction of population growth. How does that work?

GRANT: Well, this is a very important factor. What we have learned around the world is that as children become confident, as parents become confident that children will survive, and as they get certain basic education -- particularly among women, girls, get four or five years of primary education -- that their attitude toward family size changes, and then, particularly if there's availability of family planning information and services, you get -- once a certain threshold of confidence is established, and education, you can see a dramatic reduction in births. So that in Mexico City, for example, where they've had dramatic progress in the last 10 years in child health and basic education, we have seen a dramatic reduction in births. And today in Mexico City it's roughly at replacement rate. It's roughly the same in Mexico City as in Washington, D.C. today for birth rates, even though they have only one quarter the income of Washington, D.C. And the child death rate in Mexico City today is roughly the same as in Washington, D.C.

NGUYEN: I see you use only -- you depend heavily on statistics to draw your report. But nowhere in there do you admit that there's a margin of errors. Every time you use statistics, they are not perfect.

GRANT: Oh, absolutely. You couldn't be more right. And we do make it very clear in the introduction to this report that there are great weaknesses in statistics, and they need to be improved. But the way you get them improved is to get them out, get -- once you begin comparing cities in the United States with other cities, countries around the world, there is then an additional incentive to improve the data; the World Summit for Children called on all countries to improve their data. And we've come a long way. I mean, I remember in 1972 I was in the Indian Planning Commission, and in 1972 they could not give you either the infant mortality rate of the states for India, after two days of searching their files, nor could they give you basic literacy rates in the states of India. Today you can get those within 15 minutes.

There's been a shift. But we need to get these kind of data on the same quality level as economic data, because economic data every week, every month, is released in great detail.

NGUYEN: And also the number of vaccinations you do around the world. You also rely on those numbers of vaccination. Is this a fair way to characterize or to analyze the situation in a country, to say poor countries and rich countries? I'm sure a child in a rich country is much more better fed than in a poor country. How can you then say a child in the poor country is doing better than a child in the rich country?

GRANT: Well, this is a question of -- you're talking about averages. The child, the children of the middle income families in India can be better off than the children in very low income families in the United States. So that it's this contrast. But we are not saying that the condition of children in developing countries generally is better than the condition of children in the United States. But what does come out of this report is the clear indication that in the developing countries there has been dramatic progress in the last thirty to forty years in the condition of children, and that this progress, with some significant exceptions in sub-Saharan Africa, has continued all through the eighties, despite the massive economic difficulties we've read about in Latin America and in Asia and in Africa, has continued, whereas in the United States it has faltered, and we've seen an actual -- this is brought out in the report -- actual retrogression in very important areas in the United States. And this does call for a change in policy, and in effect that change in policy is coming in the United States. So we've seen, in 1993, we've seen the US Government -- for the first time we have a parental leave bill: parents with new children are now authorized to take 12 weeks off without pay, but without being fired. We were the only western industrial country that did not have such a provision. The last two times it came up it was vetoed in the White House.

BASSIR POUR: Seems incredible.

GRANT: And we now have a major new effort to immunize. We have the health bill, which, as I said, will -- by far the single biggest group to benefit will be children.

BASSIR POUR: Do you find yourself, day in, day out, trying to convince people and governments that children are important? I mean, it seems what could be more important than one's child? But do you find yourself trying to convince people in government that children are important? Is this part of your job?

GRANT: It is part of the UNICEF mission, and it -- you know, what one does find is that most governmental leaders will say that we treat children as being important. And what these statistics do is to tend to surprise them that actually by their actions they have not been as nearly, shall we call it, pro-children as they thought. Now, having said all this, I think it's important to remember that historically children have been seen as a responsibility of the family, and have seemed almost as property of the family. All you have to do is read Dickens, a century ago, his description of children in England. And what we have -- and clearly children were one of the great groups discriminated against -- the way we look at it today -- by society, and we are seeing a revolutionary change in attitudes toward children taking place. This was very much illustrated in 1990, where in one year we saw three dramatic things. We saw the Convention on the Rights of the Child come into force, and since then 20 countries have ratified it, a minimum, for it to come into force. Since then it has been ratified by more countries than any other convention in history. And --

BASSIR POUR: More than human rights?

GRANT: Well, human rights are many different parts -- for women, for race, for children. And we now have 150 countries that have ratified the Children's Convention, which is more than the other of the human rights conventions. Second, we saw the World Summit for Children. And this was the first world summit, true world summit. Up till then we'd had rich countries' summits, super power summits, but this was the first time in world history that heads of state from all parts of the world came -- 71 came here in 1990.

BASSIR POUR: Are they keeping their promise? In other words, they're still --

GRANT: Well, this was the subject of the meeting that took place on the third anniversary of the World Summit for Children at the UN. There was a roundtable, and there were a fair number of heads of state and foreign ministers of countries that had been.... And the short answer is if you had to give a grade to the world community, if you were the professor, you would say yes, you'd have to give a B. It's uneven, but over a hundred countries now have plans of action for implementing the goals of the World Summit for Children. Immunization levels have kept up and are moving ahead. The leaders of the developing countries in the last year have actually gone beyond the year 2000 goals and said we must, by the end of 1995, achieve certain goals: that measles immunization must reach 90 per cent; that the use of oral rehydration therapy for

diarrhoea, which is the biggest killer for children, must reach 80 per cent in families; that the biggest cause of mental impairment in the world -- preventable, which is the lack of iodine -- that now affects the IQ of more than 300 million people, all salt must be iodized by December 1995. And if these 1995 goals are achieved, that's fair progress. I would expect some 200 million children would not die in 1996 who did die in 1992; that the largest single cause of preventable mental impairment will have been eliminated; the largest single cause of blindness among children, which is lack of vitamin A, will have been largely eliminated; and the old dread disease of guinea worm, the transmission of that will have been stopped worldwide.

So yes, the momentum -- that's a long answer to your question -- the momentum is continuing, and we now see the United States shifting its own attitudes towards children. And this becomes very important, because how can you get a worldwide shift in attitude towards children if this shift does not occur also in the country that sets standards for jeans, rock music, as well as being the world's super power?

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Grant, that's all the time we have. Thank you for joining us on this edition of **World Chronicle**. Our guest has been James Grant, Executive Director of UNICEF. He was interviewed by Afsane Bassir Pour of *Le Monde* and Tuyet Nguyen of United Press International. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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